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ABSTRACT

A study applied an ethnographic approach to present a contextualized interpretation of children's competence as revealed in their play activities outside of school. The purpose of the study was to de-construct claims that Taiwan's aboriginal children cannot make it at school because of their "lacking cultural stimulus." Five play episodes, drawn from a year-long ethnographic study in a school composed of aboriginal students who belonged to the Atayal tribe in the mountain area in northern Taiwan, were videotaped and subjected to a fine-grained analysis. Results indicated that (1) the themes of the community play reflected the children's perceptions of adult concerns and role relationships in daily life; and (2) the conversation and interaction styles in these play contexts contained important elements of the local cultural ethos, such as valuing competence over the material resources, stressing "sharing" in group life, regarding fighting as justified actions for the benefit of the group, and listening to elders when conflicts arise. Findings suggest that the children were very good at taking whatever materials were available in the environment, transforming their meanings into play, and embedding them appropriately and creatively along with the construction of play. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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Culture Reflection and Re-construction in Aboriginal Children's Community Play: An Analysis of Children's Competence in And out of School

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Culture Reflection and Reconstruction in Aboriginal Children's Community Play:

An Analysis of Children's Competence in And out of School[1]

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Objectives

The low academic achievement of the aboriginal students in Taiwan has long been wrongly attributed to these students' "being lack of cultural stimulus" or their "inherent incompetence." Many government-funded studies have attempted to explore why such phenomena persists for years. However, most of such studies made inferences from statistical data obtained by applying survey methods. Intending to challenge the ethnocentric explanation mentioned in the above, this study applied an ethnographic approach to present a contextualized interpretation of children's competence as revealed in their play activities outside of school to de-construct claims that Taiwan's aboriginal children cannot make it at school because of their "lacking cultural stimulus." The study explores the following aspects of these children's development in the context of play and classroom interaction:(1)What are the forms and contents of these aboriginal children's play? (2)How do the aboriginal children construct their play with things provided by the local culture? (3)What competence is shown in these children's play construction ? (4)How is the local cultural values and important concerns reflected or re-constructed in these children's play? (5)How does the social organization of classroom interaction encourage(or discourage) the development of these children's competence as manifested in community play activities ?

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The above questions will be answered within the context of the researcher's understanding of the school teachers' and the village people's perception of these children's competence, as well as these children's life at school and in community.

Perspectives

Literature on school play or the play of school-aged children include different but not exclusive perspectives, such as historical, anthropological and sociological (Cheska, 1987). Though drawing insights from these different perspectives, this study was mainly influenced by Vygotsky's theory and Post-Piagetian theories to examine how the local culture impacts on the aboriginal children's capacity for meaningful fun and play. Sharing with Post-Piagetian scholars (Bruner, 1986; Bruner & Haste, 1987; Donaldson, 1978; Inagaki, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978) perspectives on children's learning and development, I regard development as a process by which children make sense through the mediation of social interaction as well as cultural tools within sociocultural contexts. Learning in general is seen as a "communal activity, a sharing of the culture" (Bruner, 1987, p. 127). When exploring various aspects of play, I attend to children's intentions as much as the aids or limitations entailed by the local culture. Special emphasis is laid on illuminating what children "can" do in play within the cultural context.

Vygotsky's (1978) analysis of play leads us to see what young children "can" do in the context of play goes "beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (p. 102). The transforming character of play has been addressed by some historians, who regard play as "an occasion of cognitive and cultural transformation" (Finkelstin, 1987, p. 18). With a major concern on the development of higher mental psychological functions, Vygotsky's discussion of sign use in play helps us to see clearly how one aspect of the transformation takes place in play. With the play object as a pivot, the use of speech liberates children from the control of the immediate perceptual world and enables the playing children to move in the realm of meanings. Such separation of meanings from objects and actions have significant consequences for children. According to Vygotsky(1978), moving according to the meaning of things results in abstract thought, and "the development of will, the ability to make conscious choices, occurs

when the child operates with the meaning of actions" (p. 101). As Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg (1993) aptly stated, "Play brings into being the mediating role of signs" (p. 709). Such transitional character of play might make it a very appropriate arena to help children move from purely situational thought to the kind of "disembedded thought" that is required to become successful in school, as Donaldson(1978) proposes.

Another relevant point that Vygotsky made in discussing play is that he insists on the existence of rules(explicit or implicit) in the context of play. Sutton-Smith(1982) points out that the dominant play theories have laid too much concern for "for the solitary player encapsulated in his individual experience" (p. 194). He proposes that "a conceptualization of play is not possible without a preliminary conceptualization of the total culture of which it is a part" (pp. 187-188). In this regard, Vygotsky's argument that "there is no such thing as play without rules" (p. 94) shows that he has taken into consideration both the the psychological as well as the cultural dimensions when discussing play. According to Vygotsky, children's knowledge of these rules is manifest in the way children fulfills certain social roles, as well as the way they relate themselves to objects. This explanation of how rules were followed implicitly or explicitly in play connects the cognitive aspects of play with the culture in which children's play occurs. Rules in real life are not merely reflected in play. They are enacted, and therefore, have the potential of being modified or re-constructed. As Finkelstein (1987) aptly stated, "Rather than reflecting culture, play precedes it" (p. 19). To some extent, social rules are "represented" in play, but not presented exactly the way they are in daily life. In sum, play enables children to assimilate as well as accommodate, to transform as well as to submit to cultural constraints.

Following what is reviewed in the above, we regard the social and cognitive aspects of play as an integrated whole in doing analysis of children's play in this study. To examine how children's cognitive competence finds expression in constructing play, we pay special attention to the mediating role of signs(in this study, language use and materials provided by the environment), and the interpersonal interaction (patterns of peer interaction) to understand how cultural rules are reflected or re-constructed in the process of play. How signs are given new meanings in the actions

of play is also described in details.

Methods

This paper, though with its focus on five play episodes in one community, draws from a year long ethnographic study in a school composed of aboriginal students in the mountain area in northern Taiwan. The study is a "collective" sense-making process. It is "collective" in two senses. First, the study was conducted by a research team, including the author--the major researcher, and two research assistants. Team meetings were held every week to have researchers inform each other with their perceptions and observations on the field. Second, the study invited comments and responses from the actors throughout and after the data-collection period.

Applying an ethnographic approach, the research team entered an elementary school composed mainly (99%) of aboriginal students to do observations and interviews in and out of school for a year. Besides taking fieldnotes, we videotaped and audiotaped the way these children interacted with others and participated in activities in class, after class, and at home. After a few months in the field, we found that it was extremely difficult to observe parent-children interactions at home since most of the parents spent days at work and seldom stayed at home. Therefore, we observed children's play instead. All of the play episodes were videotaped as long as the activity continued. After the videotapes were transcribed, the play events were sorted according to their themes, modes of interaction, and the way in which play was developed and constructed. Five play episodes were chosen for fine-grained analysis, including three dramatic play, one "fighting" play and one glass marble play episode. The major researcher also interviewed the school principal, teachers, the school janitor, the students and their parents to understand their "emic" perspectives and their view of these children's competence and life in general. To gain a deep sense of what life is like in this community, we lived in the village from time to time to participate in various community activities and talk to village people. We also collected relevant documents on the site to understand the broad social context. In sum, observation, interview and preliminary data analysis proceeded cyclically.

A Brief Description of Cloud Village And The School

Cloud Village (pseudonym) is located in the mountain area in Taipei County, in the northern part of Taiwan. The village people belong to Atayal tribe, one among the ten aboriginal tribes in Taiwan. These ten tribes amount to about 340 thousand people, constituting 2% of Taiwan's population. Among them, Atayal tribe is ranked as the second largest group. In Cloud Village, there are 363 people, constitutive of 94 families. The Cloud Village school is composed of 17 staff members and 42 students. Among the 42 students, only two are non-Atayal, who were enrolled in this school because their parents had to run a fish company in this mountain area. Among the 17 staff, four are non-Aboriginal, though not all of the 13 aboriginal teachers belong to Atayal tribe. Aboriginal or not, all of the teachers received their training at Teacher's College in Taipei or other cities. The 42 students are in six classes, ranging from first to sixth grade. That is, there are about six to seven students in every class. The unusual teacher-student ratio makes the school a so-called "mini type" school in Taiwan. All students speak Mandarin (the official language in Taiwan) at school and most of them do not speak Atayal language at home. Since there are few work opportunities in Cloud Village, most of the adults have to go out of the mountain (40 minutes' drive) to get part-time and temporary jobs elsewhere. Parents' work situation greatly impacts on the family life--most of the children have to prepare meals on their own and spend more time with peers than with parents.

All of the school age children in the play episodes were enrolled in Cloud Village school and the rest of the children were village preschool children, ranging from 4 to 6 years of age, and had no school experience at that time. Information regarding the sociohistorical factors that impact on Taiwan's aborigines, though not mentioned here, would be woven into the process of interpretation.

I will first of all present the five play episodes and then discuss the children's competence as shown in these community play. Then, after interweaving data from various sources and information from contexts of different levels, I will discuss some possible reasons why the school teachers failed to see these children's competence in the classroom and attributed these children's poor performance at school to their "inherent incompetence."

Play in the Community: Five Play Episodes

As mentioned, most of the teachers, the principal and the community district administrative director unanimously explained to me that Cloud Village children did poorly in school because of their "lack of cultural stimulus." However, in the community play activities, I saw traditional Atayal culture became transformed and re-constructed while children interacted with one another in these play contexts. The following five more complete play episodes are presented here to reveal that while looking carefully, Cloud Village children were competent in many ways.

Episode 1: Playing with the glass marbles

In the vacant area not far away from the school, we often saw two or three boys squatting down to play with marbles. One Saturday afternoon, we stood there quietly and observed three second graders--Ding, Wei and Ming playing with marbles. Among the three boys, it seemed that only Ding and Wei were the real "players." Ming provided Ding with marbles from time to time but remained an "observer" in the game.

12:28:21 PM

Ming: *Where is my marble?*

Wei and Ding tossed their marbles as far as they could, which signified the starting point of the game.

12:28:24

While Ding and Wei ran forward to see whose marble was tossed farther, Ming ran along with them.

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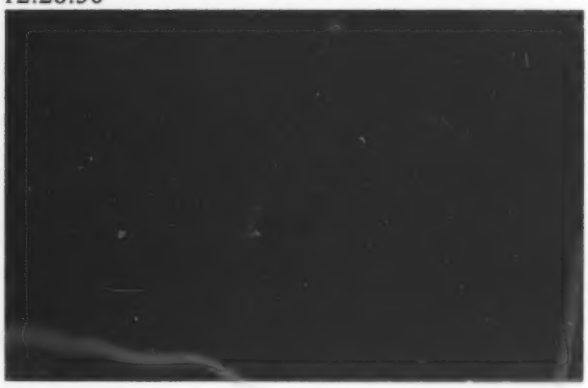
12:28:30

Ding hit the marbles in the triangle area and put the marble won into his pocket. Wei asked from Ming for more marbles to play another round.

12:28:32

While Ding kept on tossing, Wei stood aside to watch and instruct Ming's "unrecognized" tossing.

12:28:50



Ming: *I want to play, too.*
Wei>Ming: *Let me toss it for you.*
Let me play.
Ming>Wei: *I want to play, too.*

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12:29:01

Another round of the game.

Wei>Ming: *Just put them in the right place. Don't move them!*

Ming>Wei: *But those are mine.*

12:29:13

Wei won one round and gave some marbles to Ming.

12:29:27

Ming drew a triangle on the ground and put some marbles in it.

Ding>Ming: *No, No, don't play now.*

Wei>Ming: *If you play, you will lose a lot!*

Seemingly mumbling to himself, Ming said: *But I do place the marbles for him.* (videotape, 1994-10-15)

The game kept going for a long while. Whenever Ming made attempts to participate, the other two demanded him to "Go away!" Wei even shouted to Ming

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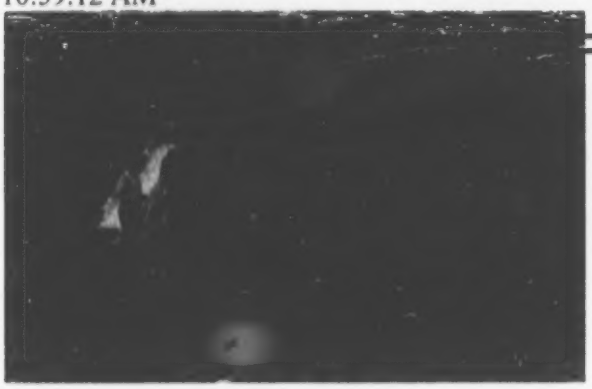
"Don't you ever disturb us any more!" one time when Ming threw one marble to the target place after the other two boys. After receiving the warning, Ming remained quiet, squatted aside and simply watched the game. Even when he did throw the marble, he picked it up silently since the other two seemed to pay no attention to his action. Wei kept asking marbles from Ming throught the game. Later on, Ming acted as if he were Wei's "assistant" and prepared marbles for Wei to play.

In this game, though being the major "owner" of marbles, Ming was not accepted as the participant of the game because of his less well-developed skill. The expert players got to be the formal participant and talked to the marble-owner with a demanding tone. It shows that in the peer world of Cloud village, what really counts is skill, not the quantity of material resources. If Ding and Wei allowed Ming to join the game, they might win more marbles since it would be a lot easier to win marbles from a lousy player. However, playing with Ming might result in a less competitive game and henceforth, less fun. Fun process, apparently was more important to Ding and Wei than winning more marbles.

Episode 2: Playing fighting

On a Sunday morning in March, we saw eight boys pushed one another to and fro in the small play area in school. Li-Shu asked them "What are you playing?" "Playing fighting!" said one of them. The two parties yelled "How dare you bully our leader!" In a few minutes, the play turned into a real fight. During the process, we saw some aspects of peer culture which was manifested in the interactions among these boys.

10:59:12 AM



Ming and Shong, with tightly held fists, angrily staring at each other. Ming kept saying: *Don't you dare to offend me!*

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10:59:21

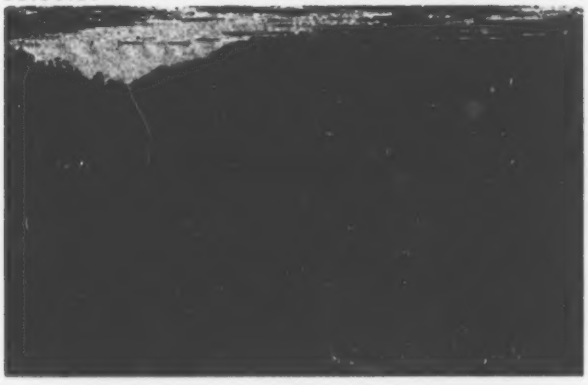
Shong hit Ming first and started running. While Ming was chasing Shong, Tong, an older boy, ran over to grab Ming from behind.

The two boys were entangled again and again but continued grabbing and hitting each other. When Shong uttered "dirty" words to Ming, the older child Tong hit Shong's head right away, scolded him: "Why do you say dirty words all the time?" Shong stopped calling names right away but spitted toward Ming. Ming spitted back. A few seconds later, Shong and Ming grappled with each other again.

10:59:34

Tong shouted to the rest of the children: *Grab their hands, like this! Separate them!* Tong grabbed Ming from behind and Wei pulled Shong aside.

11:00:17



A few seconds later, Tong grabbed Ming's and Shong's hands and had them shake hands to stop the fight.

(videotape, 1995-3-25)

When these children were playing fighting, the leaders of the two parties were

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the second-grader Ming and the first grader--Shong, respectively. Apparently, to be a leader, one does not have to be the oldest of the group. When the leader was offended by any member of the other group, all of the members have to fight for the honor of their leader. That is to say, to fight for the group leader is regarded as a justified action in the peer world. When it came to the real fighting, the older child Tong (a fifth grader) was responsible for mediating the conflict and his "instruction" seemed to be accepted by the fighters, who were younger than Tong.

Episode 3: Go shopping

On her way to visit one first-grade boy's home, Li-Shu saw three children playing on the road. These children picked some leaves from a tree nearby, used them as money and talked to one another as father, mother, and a child in a family. The mother was going to buy food and asked money from the father:

The mother: *Give me some money!*

The father: *No way. I'll have to save some for the children.*

The mother: *Just give me one.*

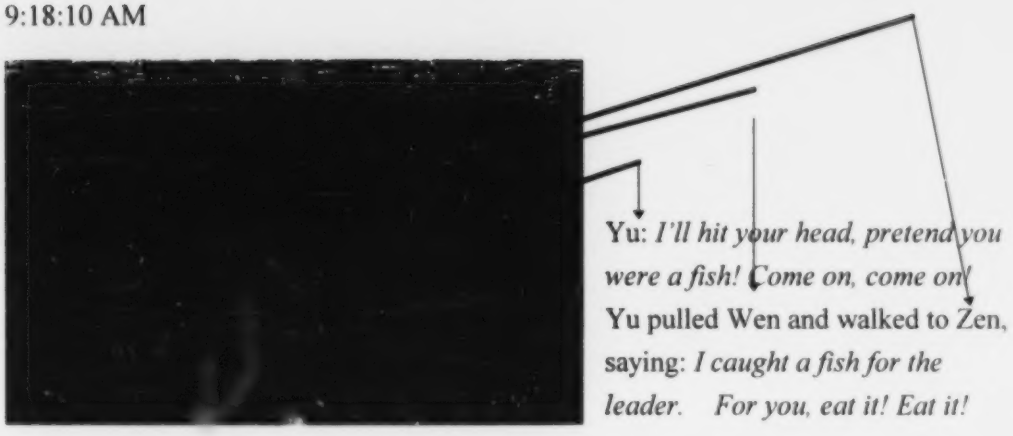
The father then gave the mother one leaf. (Li-Shu, retrospective notes, 1995-8-20)

Lack of work opportunities has long been a problem in Cloud village. The issue of money is a major concern in most of the family here. These young children might be enacting a scene which was very familiar to them at home.

Episode 4: Catching the fish

While taking a break from doing classroom observation one day, accidentally I saw three preschool children playing in the play ground. I walked to them and asked them if it would be fine for me to videotape their play. The three of them went to sit on the see-saw nearby right away, smiled and showed a "V" gesture with their fingers. Then I asked them of their age. The boy Yu told me he was five, pointed to one of the two girls, and told me she was six. "So she is older than you?" The other girl Wen, who looked a lot younger than the other two, stood up and said "I am older!" The boy shouted to her "I am older than you!" Wen responded with a scolding tone "Older? How come you are older?" A while later, Yu picked up a stick with a wire circle on the top and hooked it around Wen's neck.

9:18:10 AM



Yu: *I'll hit your head, pretend you were a fish! Come on, come on!* Yu pulled Wen and walked to Zen, saying: *I caught a fish for the leader. For you, eat it! Eat it!*

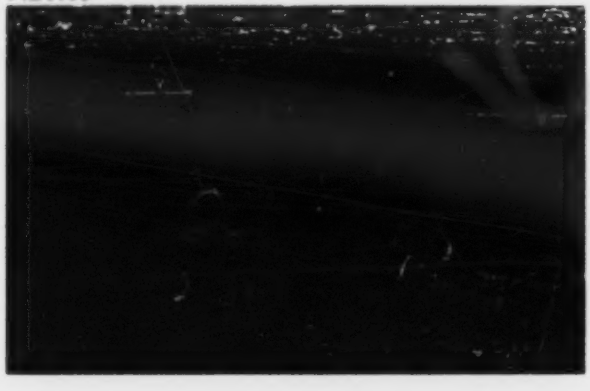
Zen smiled but pushed Wen away. Yu made another attempt to hook Wen. Wen ran away and bumped onto the board of the see-saw accidentally.

9:19:55

Yu>Wen: *Who told you to go this way?* Yu touched Wen's head lightly and handed her the stick.

Wen did not receive the stick. Yu pulled her sleeve, walked to Zen, and said "Sit like her. Sit!" Wen sat down as told. A few seconds later, Yu asked Wen to stand up. Wen did as requested. Yu grabbed the stick back from Zen and started chasing Wen again.

9:21:05



Yu: *I want to catch the fish. This is a fish and I will chase the fish. You run! Quickly, the fish will run. You are a fish. Run! Run quickly!*

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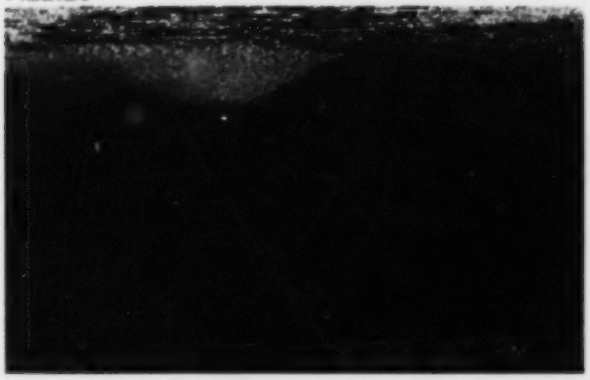
While Yu caught Wen, he sent Wen to Zen and shouted "*Eat! Eat the fish!*" Zen smiled and gave the direction: "*Cook her first.*"

9:22:20



Yu "took" Wen up to the top of a slide, and at the same time, shouted continuously: "*Cook the fish, cook the fish.*" He took Wen back to where Zen sat after finishing cooking. (videotape, 1995-2-24)

The three children played the chasing-catching-cooking-eating sequence several rounds. The play came to an end when they ran away from the park. During the repetitive process, they used various ways to cook the fish, such as roasting and cooking with boiling water.

As shown, Yu saw the stick without the net and thought of playing the fish-catching game spontaneously. Wen seemed to go with Yu's agenda obediently and allowed Yu to chase her and catch her again and again. The other girl Zen seemed to be a leader in the game. Yu not only prepared food for her but also acted according to her directions. While Wen bumped into the board of the see-saw, Yu jumped out of the play context and comforted Wen as a brother would do to a younger sister in real life. The theme of catching and cooking fish, as the previous episode 3, reflects these children's knowledge of the food culture in the village. Their competence in developing plot and dialogue was also impressive.

Episode 5: In and out of the house

This episode happens in the open yard right beside the entrance of the elementary school. Since the day care located in the school would be transformed into a kindergarten, the school moved out one toy house and left it in the yard. While we saw the children, the play had been started for some time. It lasted for about forty minutes since we started videotaping. The following scenario reveal the way these children perceive the social roles in a family and how these perception was enacted in the way they treated one another.

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4:11:29 PM

Yun was busy in and out. Sometimes she shouted to the two younger girls inside the house. While one of the girl stepped out of the house, Yun hit her with the palm leave: *"How can you come out? Go inside!"* A while later, one of the girls asked Yun's permission to come out to piss.

In the following scene, we saw Ping come over with a plate in her hands. She told Yun first before placing the plate on the ground.

4:18:29

Ping put the plate on the ground and said: *I will make a cake.* A while later, she took the younger one away and said *Sleep well, baby, sleep well.*

Suddenly, Shong came over, with a bag of cookies in hand. He kicked the door open. Yun frowned and asked him "What do you want?" Shong said something to Yun. Yun made no response but resumed her action. Shong started to walk around the house, looked at the roof and ate his cookie in the meantime. Later, Shong found a stick, went inside the house and used it to support a closet.

4:20:35

Shong took the stick and walked inside.

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Shong tried on several sticks but still found it not working. Yun scolded the younger girl inside the house and at the same time complained about the time it took for Shong to find the stick. Shong finally found an appropriate one. He and Yun together used the stick to support a table. The three family members stayed in the house for a while as shown in the following scene:

4:22:30

The "couple" seemed to be discussing something and the "daughter" listened to them quietly on the side.

Two minutes later, Shun shared with Yun some of his cookies and started to do the decoration (or maintenance) job.

4:24:32

Shong climbed onto the roof and shouted to Yun: *Give it to me!*
Yun handed him a stick accordingly.
(videotape, 1995, 4-28)

Different from Yun's previous attitude towards Shong's intervention to the house chore, she became very supportive to what Shong was doing after Shong started to make contribution to maintain the house. Two minutes later, two other children came into the house and Yun shouted out loud "They took our stuff!" Shong remained standing on the roof and said "Let me handle it." They successfully drove the intruders away, went into the house and ate cookies there. Later on, they turned the house into a store.....

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In this play episode, children's perception of family roles was manifest in the way they talked, acted and related to one another. Yun was initially the "commander" of the house. The gestures and tone she used to scold her "children" were similar to our observation of how parents talked to their children in the community. Later on, Yun accepted Shong's direction, probably because Shong made genuine efforts in playing the role of guarding and maintaining the house.

Discussion

The above play episodes seem ordinary as compared with children's play elsewhere in general. If we situate these episodes within the framework of Atayal traditional culture, it is also clear that Atayal children are able to engage themselves in complex social and cognitive process in play activities, just like children everywhere. What merit out attention is what these play episodes enable us to see in terms of these children' competence which the school teachers failed to see in the context of classroom activities. Contrary to the school teachers' complaint that Cloud village children were inherently less intelligent and did not know how to think, these children showed complex cognitive competence in using "cultural tool kits" provided by the local culture to make sense in the community play activities.

Firstly, the themes of the community play reflect these children's perceptions of adult concerns and role relationships in daily life, such as earning a living, catching and cooking fish, how to act as a group member, husband, wife and children, etc.. As Vygotsky(1978) states, "What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behavior in play" (p. 95). In early twentieth century when Taiwan was under the regime of Japanese government, Japanese scholar Zo-Shan-Rong-Zi did some fieldwork in areas (including Cloud Village) to understand Atayal people's life in various parts of Taiwan so that the Japanese government would know how to "deal with" the aboriginal tribes. Documented in his report, there were more than ten kinds of play activities and toys which show how children's play at that time was influenced by adults' life styles. These play activities include: "throwing stones," "hunting game," "entrapping birds and animals," "biting the leaves to make patterns," and "building small houses," etc.. Most of the toys reported were made of materials available in the local environment, such as bamboo, the tail of bear, and the ear of

pigs, etc.. What remains true almost eighty years later is that Atayal children are very good at making spontaneous use of materials available in their life environment to develop their play activities. Consistently, when joining the local eat-out party, we were impressed by the complex skills of Cloud village people, adults and children alike, in applying natural resources to make a fire. Moreover, current adult concerns as a result of the changing economic structure in Taiwan are also reflected in these children's play. As shown in episode 3, being lack of material resource in a Han dominated society has become one of the major causes of family dispute.

The role and social relationship defined by traditional culture, too, has undergone some changes in Atayal society. Wang's (1990) observation in another Atayal village shows that the traditional "Men high, women low" relationship is no longer as solid as it had been. Our observations in Cloud village still show that men are regarded as the major decision-maker and women are required to be obedient accordingly. In children's play however, we see some possible traces or dynamics in re-interpreting the local culture. For example, role perceptions are not a direct copy of adult roles in Atayal culture. Women's roles in these children's play were substantiated with more power in decision-making and in initiating negotiation than those of adults in real life. In Atayal language, boys are called "Panasalu · Qalang," which means "the central pillar of the society" whereas girls are called "Nanigan · Pinta," which means "the one who cooks and finds food." In episode 5, Yun's mother role is far more significant than one who "cooks and finds food." Her interpretation and enactment of the mother role seems to show her reconstruction of a social role as defined by the traditional Atayal culture.

Secondly, the conversation and interaction styles in these play contexts contain some important elements of the local Atayal cultural ethos, such as valuing competence over the material resources, stressing "sharing" in group life, regarding fighting as justified actions for the benefits of the group, and listening to the elders when conflicts arise. Huang (1993) analyzed the social types of the ten aboriginal tribes in Taiwan and classified them into two major types. In the political aspect, Atayal was classified as the type of society which emphasizes "equal power and personal competence" as opposed to the other type which has hierarchical power system. In the marble game, the skills of playing with the marbles was regarded as a

qualification more important than the ownership of marbles in deciding who got to be play partners. Similarly, in the fighting scene, the peer leader was chosen based on his competence rather than his age. That is, the value system implicit in the social structure of Atayal tribe was reflected in the way children organize themselves in community play.

In sum, Cloud village children were very good at taking whatever materials available in the environment, transformed their meanings in play, and embedded them appropriately and creatively along with the construction of play. In this regard, these aboriginal children were not in any way less competent than Han children living in other places in Taiwan. What differs is the themes and interaction styles invoked in play. That is, the sense-making process generated in Cloud village children's play activities are situated within a cultural framework that is different from Han's. This conclusion provides me with better clues to understand the reasons why the teachers and village people claimed that Cloud village children were lack of cultural stimulus.

Atayal culture is seen as reflected and to some extent reconstructed in children's play. What these children are lack of is not culture per se, but the kind of competence which is necessary for students to acquire to become successful at school, that is, the "instrumental competence" as defined by Spindler & Spindler(1994). The school teachers will not deny the fact that every child, including children in Cloud village, was born into a culture. When these teachers made the negative claim, they probably were unaware of their own ethnocentrism when applying the term "culture." If teachers want to help the children in Cloud village do better at school, the first thing to do is not complaining about what these children cannot do, but to recognize what they can do, what is made possible in the local Atayal cultural context.

In this regard, even if these children's competence as revealed in community activities was not suppressed on purpose, it is clear that such competence has not been well recognized, not to mention to be further cultivated in school learning situations. Our year-long observation of the first-graders' Mandarin lessons found two dominant characteristics regarding the interaction styles in classroom: (1) Most of the classroom interactions had a very rigid participation structure. The interactions were either between the teacher and the whole class(six students) or the teacher and one nominated student. Peer interactions, even in a class of such a small size, seldom

happened because the teacher controlled who had the right to talk very strictly. (2) Whenever the interaction happens, it was the teacher who did most of the talk. The contents of her talk was mostly angry words (scolding the students) or some unintelligible words, such as terminology(Tsai, 1996, pp. 139-140). However, when the students' initiation was accepted by the teacher, their talk was rich and long. The teacher even "complained" to me that "Sometimes I ask them to make sentences, but they make the whole thing like they were telling stories. Then I will ask them to make it short. It was like they associate many things and make the narrative become one with causal relationships, as if they were telling a story. They tended to making long" (interview, 1995-3-31). When the first-graders used Atayal language(only one or two words) to answer the teacher's question, they were scolded lightly sometimes and then were urged to use Mandarin instead. In such classroom context, it would be very difficult to recognize, not to mention to appreciate, the competence these children had when entering school. The problem of "unintended bias" as discussed by Cazden(1988) was found in this school, too. As Cazden suggests, "unless the context of instruction itself can be changed", patterns of instruction will remain difficult to change since they are "functional in their present context" (p. 95). Moreover, to eliminate the negative effects of "unintended bias," we as teachers must examine our own actions in the classroom, as Cazden proposes.

Play and classroom are two very different learning contexts by nature. They involve different cognitive as well as social constraints to the students. However, it was time for us to understand that "all normal children can show skill as thinkers and language users to a degree which mush compel our respect" (Donaldson, 1978, p. 127). If children can make sense within meaningful local contexts outside of school such as the competence shown in the play episodes of Cloud village children, teachers are responsible to help students become more aware of the means they apply to make sense and learn to reflect upon these sense-making approaches "in abstraction from the contexts in which they employ them"(Donaldson, 1978, p. 127). If school teachers only recognize that abstract thinking is important for students to make it in the long run while refusing to make continuous attempts to help children "move beyond the bounds of human sense," I echo with Donaldson's (1978) statement that "we must not call [our students] stupid. We must rather call ourselves indifferent or

afraid" (p. 135).

Implication

To recognize what children can do is not as easy as it sounds to be. To become aware of cultural differences is easy to propose, but it is far more difficult to enact such awareness in everyday classroom life. As Spindler (1994) states, "Perhaps both teachers and students have to become ethnographers, studying each other and themselves" (p. 19). Given the fact that many studies have addressed the issue of cultural differences in school internationally, teachers in Taiwan seem to be less informed in this regard and have less access to resources as to how to work with students who come from different cultures. I hope this study will clarify some misunderstandings and serve as a reminder to help teachers cultivate a multicultural perspective, especially those who work with minority students in Taiwan. Three implications are offered here below:

1. The fact that Atayal culture was reflected as well as reconstructed in Cloud village children's community play supports the claim that these children do not lack cultural stimuli, only that such "cultural stimuli" are different from which those teachers are familiar with. Such awareness can encourage teachers' willingness to recognize these children's competence. In designing curriculum that responds to these children's unique strengths, teachers and policy makers will have a more empirical base to make decisions. For example, the "group over individual" value manifested in the "fighting" play and the "skills over material resources" value manifested in glass marble play can be important references for teachers to organize social interactions in the classroom.

2. Qualitative data provided by the study can be used to cultivate a multicultural perspective of all prospective teachers in the teacher-training universities or colleges. As Frost(1992) observed, adults, including teachers "have very little idea of what children actually do during play time" (p. 77). Prospective teachers can also learn from reading these play texts the skills necessary to observe children at play.

3. If play is "a state of subjective experience" as Csikszentmihalyi(1981, p. 19, cited in Miracle, 1987, p. 41) proposed, the analysis of play text cannot be separated from an analysis of the contexts in which it is embedded in to understand the players'

needs, intentions and the way play texts and cultural contexts are mutually influenced and constituted. The findings of this study exemplify such a necessity in conducting research on children's play.

Lastly, by sharing the way Cloud Village children spontaneously transformed and constructed the meanings of signs made accessible by the local Atayal culture , I hope to invite insights and comments from researchers doing similar research in their countries. Such sharing will enrich our mutual understanding on how children's relationship with the environment changes from an unmediated one to one that is mediated by sign use and interpersonal interactions. It will also move us forward in creating learning contexts in which children can recognize and respond to meaningful purposes in and out of school.

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